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ABSTRACT

A method of evaluation that is appropriate for a student affairs department that contains more than one service unit (e.g., a counseling center or student union) is described. A staff member in each service unit is appointed to conduct that unit's self-study, with the consultative help of an experienced evaluation coordinator. For each unit, the evaluation coordinator develops a Prescriptive Evaluation Plan (PEP) to guide the self-study. PEPs suggest how the service unit representative might measure purpose statements against five evaluation criteria: (1) whether the purpose is being accomplished; (2) whether the purpose is being accomplished in a user-friendly manner; (3) whether the purpose is being accomplished in a cost-effective manner; (4) whether the purpose is being accomplished in an efficient manner; and (5) how the purpose promotes student development. While this method capitalizes on the expertise of those who administer the services being evaluated, it also provides the structure and support necessary for a systematic and objective large-scale evaluation to be implemented. Such evaluation should represent an opportunity to verify that the component parts of a department are working productively together to fulfill their common mission in student affairs. (SLD)

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PRESCRIPTIVE EVALUATION PLANS: A METHOD OF LARGE-SCALE EVALUATION IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Victoria J. Balenger, William E. Sedlacek, and
James M. Osteen

Research Report #16-89

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SUMMARY

This paper describes a method of evaluation that is appropriate for a student affairs department that contains more than one service unit (e.g., a counseling center or student union). A staff member in each service unit is appointed to conduct that unit's self-study, with the consultative help of an experienced evaluation coordinator. For each unit, the evaluation coordinator develops a Prescriptive Evaluation Plan (PEP) to guide the self-study. While this method capitalizes on the expertise of those who administer the services being evaluated, it also provides the structure and support necessary for a systematic and objective large-scale evaluation to be implemented.

Large-scale evaluation in student affairs can present itself as an arduous task, and there may be a tendency to avoid it. Physical and psychological barriers include scanty resources (Brewer, 1983), resistant participants (Kuh, 1979), lack of familiarity with evaluation methods (Kuh, 1979), and a general sense of being overwhelmed by the process. However, an evaluation plan which engages participants and maximizes the use of existing resources can transcend such barriers, making evaluation a manageable as well as a meaningful endeavor.

Kuh (1979) observed that articles which provide pedagogical assistance to practitioners in their evaluation efforts have not appeared with any regularity in the student affairs literature. Here, a method of decentralized large-scale evaluation is described. The approach is especially useful for student affairs departments which offer more than one service managed as semi-autonomous units, such as a large comprehensive counseling center, a resident life department, or a student union. For purposes of illustration, an application of this method in a learning assistance service in a counseling center will be described.

While a pre-established set of evaluation criteria provides a skeletal evaluation model, this model materializes only when the criteria are adapted for use by each service unit in the department. Criteria are applied to individual units in a flexible manner that takes into account their unique characteristics. Service units might use divergent methods of data collection in assessing the same criteria, and might even dispense with any

evaluation criterion that does not seem applicable to them.

Because student affairs practitioners have varying levels of comfort and experience with evaluation, it is helpful to appoint an evaluation coordinator to provide consultation and support in the process. However, the actual implementation of the evaluation plan should be left to those who directly administer the services to be evaluated. One managerial or supervisory staff person from each service area in the unit can be designated to conduct the evaluation for that unit. For example, a counseling center which includes a counseling service, a learning assistance service, a disabled student service, and an educational testing service might have four service unit representatives.

Training of unit evaluators should focus on the steps of the evaluation model: developing purpose statements, data collection, data analysis, and reporting. A group training session is an effective means of orienting participants to their roles and responsibilities in the evaluation. Part of the training should focus on writing purpose statements for each service unit. Purpose statements for individual units should reflect the larger mission of the department. For example, the purpose statements for a learning assistance service in a counseling center might read:

(1) To provide tutorial services to students having difficulty with specific academic subjects.

(2) To teach study skills and time management through a campus outreach program and individual instruction.

After the training stage, the evaluation coordinator meets individually with each service unit representative to verify purpose

statements and identify indicators of their accomplishment. As a result of these conferences, the evaluation coordinator is able to develop an individualized plan for the self-study to be conducted in each service unit. These evaluation "roadmaps" have been dubbed Prescriptive Evaluation Plans, or PEPs. See the Appendix for an example of a PEP for a learning assistance service.

Specifically, PEPs suggest how the service unit representative might measure purpose statements against the following evaluation criteria:

(1) Is this purpose being accomplished?
(2) Is this purpose being accomplished in a user-friendly manner?
(3) Is this purpose being accomplished in a cost-effective manner?
(4) Is this purpose being accomplished in an efficient manner?
(5) How does this purpose promote student development?

Often the first criterion, purpose accomplishment, is met by simply documenting what the service unit does toward fulfilling each purpose statement. For example, the learning assistance service could verify its first purpose statement by documenting the nature of its tutorial service, the number of students who used the service during the past year, user characteristics, and referral sources. To demonstrate that the second purpose statement is being accomplished, information may be gathered concerning the number of study skills and time management outreach sessions presented during the past year, the number of students reached through these efforts, and the number of time management and study skills clients seen individually during the same period of time.

Success in meeting other evaluation criteria may be determined by the following methods:

(1) data from organizational records
(2) data regularly collected in the service unit
(3) relevant past research and evaluation findings
(4) use of standardized instruments
(5) user satisfaction surveys
(6) focused discussions of service unit staff or users
(7) interviews of administrators, service unit staff, or users
(8) informal observations of the evaluator.

The PEP should clearly outline which method(s) can be used to assess each purpose statement against the evaluation criteria.

Unit representatives are typically able to execute PEPs with little assistance from the evaluation coordinator. Evaluation is typically less rigorous and sophisticated than research, and less subject to control (Burck & Peterson, 1975). However, to ensure objectivity, certain aspects of the evaluation (e.g., user satisfaction surveys; focused discussions) can be conducted by the evaluation coordinator or another person uninvolved with the unit.

Finally, PEPs can serve as outlines when unit representatives write evaluation summaries for their service units. Evaluation findings should effectuate a short list of recommendations for redressing weaknesses and building upon strengths in each service unit. Unit representatives can be encouraged to focus not only on external solutions (e.g., allocation of resources), but also on internal changes in policy and procedure (e.g., staff training and development).

Depending upon the intended use of the collective unit reports, some editing of individual reports by the evaluation coordinator may

be necessary to insure that all are presented in a uniform and balanced manner. Although the quality of evaluation summaries may vary, this does not detract from the value of the process by which they were generated. Undergoing a self-study can be a developmental experience for administrators and staff members alike. Users benefit not only from improved services within the unit, but also from the unit's renewed sense of purpose and direction.

Kuh (1979) noted, "...if the norms of a student affairs division do not...support a reasonably objective examination of the quality and impact of programs, the health and growth of the division may be impaired" (p. 9). Evaluation should be viewed, then, as an opportunity to verify that the component parts of a department are working productively together to fulfill their common mission in student affairs.

References

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Appendix

Prescriptive Evaluation Plan for Learning Assistance Service

PURPOSE STATEMENTS

(1) To provide tutorial services to students having difficulty with specific academic subjects.

(2) To teach study skills and time management through a campus outreach program and individual instruction.

METHODS FOR APPLYING EVALUATION CRITERIA TO PURPOSE STATEMENTS:

Criterion 1 - Purpose Accomplishment

(Statement 1)

1. Enumerate and describe tutorial services available in the unit.
2. Document the number of students who used the tutorial services during the past year.
3. Document user characteristics.
4. Document referral sources.
5. Describe how outcomes are assessed, and report any available data regarding benefits to users of the service during the past year.

(Statement 2)

1. Enumerate and describe the study skills and time management services available within the service unit and through the unit's campus outreach program.
2. Document the number of students who used the study skills and time management services within the past year.
3. Document user characteristics.
4. Document referral sources.
5. Describe how outcomes are assessed, and report any available data regarding benefits to users of the service during the past year.

Criterion 2 - User Satisfaction

(Statement 1)

1. Administer a survey to a random sample of users to measure their satisfaction with the tutorial services they received.
2. Interview a limited number of users (randomly selected) to gather additional information about how the tutorial services are perceived.

Prescriptive Evaluation Plan (continued)

Criterion 2 - User Satisfaction (continued)

(Statement 2)

1. Administer a survey to a random sample of users to measure their satisfaction with the study skills and time management services they received.
2. Interview a limited number of randomly selected users to gather additional information about how the study skills and time management services are perceived.

Criterion 3 - Cost-Effectiveness

(Statement 1 and Statement 2)

1. Document the service unit's operating budget for the past year and calculate specific program costs and revenues.
2. Discuss in your final service unit evaluation report the issue of cost-effectiveness as it relates to the activities in your unit.

Criterion 4 - Efficiency

(Statement 1 and Statement 2)

1. Conduct a focused discussion of service unit staff to consider factors that affect efficiency, including resources, policies and procedures, and channels of communication. In your final unit evaluation report, discuss feedback elicited by this process.
2. Conduct an audit of procedures with the help of an outside observer.

Criterion 5 - Student Development

(Statement 1 and Statement 2)

1. Cite past research evidence relating the services provided by your unit to student development (e.g., effect of tutoring on GPA).
2. Collect and analyze data on retention rates of service recipients as compared with other students.